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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA LAMENTS BETRAYAL OF MARONITE CHURCH

REF: BEIRUT 1016

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) A visibly upset PM Siniora told the Ambassador July 17 he was flabbergasted by what he saw as Maronite Patriarch Sfeir's ongoing attacks against GOL alleged efforts to marginalize Lebanon's Christian population. Stressing the GOL's policy of accommodating Christians was one of "conviction," Siniora said he had made a determined effort to convert Muslims to the idea of a democratic, independent Lebanese state that is tolerant of all confessional groups. He urged the Ambassador to stress to the Patriarch the need for Christian MPs to vote in the upcoming presidential election and to oppose any amendments to the constitution.

¶12. (C) The following day the Patriarch, who seemed unconvinced by Siniora's claim to represent "all Lebanese," reiterated to the Ambassador his call for a two-thirds quorum in parliament to elect the next president as the only way to ensure the elections are constitutionally legitimate. He agreed that all Christian MPs must vote and, though not explicit, suggested that Aoun was putting personal (and Syrian) interests above those of the country. End summary.

GOL DETERMINED TO INCLUDE CHRISTIANS

¶13. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Defense Attaché and Pol/Econ Chief, met with the PM at his office in the Grand Serail on July 17. PM Advisors Mohamad Chatah and Rola Noureddine and Acting FM Tareq Mitri also attended the meeting. Siniora began on a positive note, stating that despite the human losses (LAF casualties had just topped 100), Nahr al-Barid was a great victory, especially for the Lebanese state but also for the LAF, which gained increased respect both domestically and internationally for its role as protector of all Lebanese territory.

¶14. (C) However, Siniora warned, the Christians will use the GOL's promises to rebuild the Palestinian camp as a "scarecrow" for their own political objectives, claiming the Siniora government's real intent is to nationalize the country's 400,000 Palestinian refugees ("tawteen") to boost the Sunni population at the expense of the Christians. Siniora said he was sending Radwan al-Sayyed (a Muslim scholar close to Siniora) to meet with the Patriarch on July

20 with reassuring messages.

¶15. (C) Then, a normally subdued Sini ora became visibly agitated, raising his voice, pounding the arms of his chair and nearly leaping to his feet, exclaimed that he was "flabbergasted" by the Patriarch's accusations that the GOL is attempting to undermine Lebanon's Christian population. These accusations were completely contrary to what the Patriarch told Sini ora the day before when he endorsed the GOL's efforts, saying, "God be with you," Sini ora complained.

¶16. (C) "What does he want?" Sini ora asked several times, noting that he was the first Lebanese prime minister to adopt the principles of national accommodation previously considered taboo by Lebanon's Muslims. Furthermore, he stressed, the GOL was doing this out of "conviction," adding he had made a determined effort to convert Muslims to the idea of a democratic, independent Lebanese state that is tolerant of all confessional groups. The fact that his government was also fighting Sunni terrorists in Nahr al-Barid was further proof of the GOL's determination not to let Muslim extremists control Lebanon.

¶17. (C) The Ambassador noted that many of the recent accusations launched by the Maronite church to demonstrate the GOL's efforts to "Islamize" Lebanon were based on falsehoods (ref tel). Moreover, several traditionally Muslim positions also have been held temporarily -- sometimes for years -- by Christians until a suitable Muslim candidate was selected, further demonstrating the GOL's nonconfessional approach.

SINIORA AGAINST SETTLEMENT

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OF PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON

¶18. (C) Still agitated, Sini ora refuted the Maronites' allegations of "tawteen," stressing that while he had used all of his "credibility, image, innocence, and truthfulness" with the Palestinians to convince them to leave Lebanon, they are going to return to Nahr al-Barid. He recounted former Maronite League President Michel Edde's surprise at the PM's announcement that he was going to rebuild the camp, to which he reportedly replied that he had no choice. The GOL had to rebuild Nahr al-Barid to avoid fomenting instability in the other Palestinian camps in Lebanon, he explained, though he also quipped, "I don't want to rebuilt the camp; I want a boat!"

¶19. (C) Chatah, citing PM Sini ora's recent trip to Paris, Rome, and Madrid, viewed by some as quasi-head of state visits that usurped the role of Lebanon's president, interjected that part of the problem was the Maronites' fear that Sunnis posed a threat to the fundamental Lebanese ideology of a Christian president, and, more generally of Sunni efforts to overtake the Christians. It's the same old game, Chatah explained; the opposition is insisting on a consensus presidential candidate and an agreed "basket" of political decisions to erode March 14's majority.

¶10. (C) Sini ora said he had told the Patriarch that the GOL wants presidential elections to occur and wants the Christians to play an important role, urging him to convince the Christian MPs to vote. Furthermore, Sini ora said he stressed that there should be no amendment to the constitution because it would take Lebanon back to the same process used under the Syrian mandate (Note: Under Syrian occupation, the constitution was amended three times: in 1995, to extend the late President Elias Hrawi's term by three years; in 1998, to allow current president Lahoud, then chief of the army, to run for president; and in 2004, when Lahoud's term was extended for three years under Syrian pressure. End note.) Sini ora also noted that, if the constitution is amended regarding presidential elections, it

makes it that much easier to amend it further, eroding the Christian's 50 percent power share in government institutions. Furthermore, Siniora told the Patriarch he should publicly oppose any amendment to the constitution (needed for LAF Commander General Michel Sleiman to run for president).

PATRIARCH'S POSITIONS SUPPORT AOUN
(DESPITE PATRIARCH'S DISLIKE OF AOUN)

¶11. (C) The Ambassador noted that Sunnis may eventually question Siniora's good faith efforts to include Lebanon's Christian population if in return all they see are attacks. The last thing Lebanon needs now is a Christian/Sunni conflict. Siniora agreed, adding that although the Patriarch opposes Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun, his attacks are having the unintentional effect of aiding the General in his presidential aspirations by driving Christians away from March 14. By insisting on a two-thirds quorum in parliament for the election of the next president, the Patriarch is further ensuring that March 14 will have to find a compromise candidate, such as Aoun. Siniora also agreed that to compensate these unhelpful efforts, the Patriarch should publicly stress, especially to the Christian MPs, their civic duty to vote, thus ensuring the quorum would be met.

¶12. (C) The Ambassador noted that March 14 Transportation Minister Mohamad Safadi also seemed to be breaking ranks with March 14 by openly calling for a two-thirds quorum while seemingly getting nothing in return. Siniora said he had asked him the day before why he did it, warning him his constituency wouldn't follow him. Plus, Siniora added, now you have effectively told the opposition all you need to do is kill two more MPs and you're dreams of choosing the next Prime Minister will come true. Siniora admitted he had heard rumors of Safadi's contacts with the Syrians, warning that his two enemies, former PMs Omar Karami and Nahib Mikati, would "shred him."

PATRIARCH SIGNALS DANGER IF TWO-THIRDS QUORUM NOT RESPECTED

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¶13. (C) In a trip to the summer Patriarch's Residence with Pol/Econ chief, the Ambassador also discussed the Christians' situation with Patriarch Sfeir on July 20, citing UNSCR 1701 and Ta'if as key agreements for ensuring their continued political voice. The Ambassador urged the Patriarch's public support for holding presidential elections on-time, without constitutional amendments (which would open the door for Hizballah and others to seek changes on other issues), and with full Christian MP participation. By not voting, the Ambassador argued, the Christians are only engaging in self-marginalization.

¶14. (C) PM Siniora's Sunni government, which truly sees itself as representing all of the Lebanese people, is doing what it can to support the Christians, the Ambassador stressed; unfortunately Aoun and others latched on to the bishop's accusations of Islamization, undermining the GOL's efforts. He added that France, the US, and the rest of the international community all support Lebanon's efforts; only Syria and Iran do not.

¶15. (C) The Patriarch, typically noncommittal, seemed unconvinced by the Siniora's claim to represent "all Lebanese." It was too late to form a new national unity government before the presidential elections, he said, but this should be done after parliament elects a new president. Claiming to want to cooperate with all groups in Lebanon, including the Shia and Sunnis, to elect the president, Sfeir reiterated his recent press statements calling for a two-thirds quorum as the only way to ensure the elections are

constitutionally legitimate and the president enjoys the broadest possible support; without a two-thirds quorum, he warned, there would be a "very dangerous situation" for Lebanon.

¶16. (C) Sfeir agreed that all Christian MPs should vote, noting that many, however, fearing Syrian or Muslim reprisals, currently are seeking safety abroad. Though not explicit, Sfeir suggested that Aoun was putting personal (and Syrian) interests above those of the country; if Aoun were a good patriot he would personally attend the parliamentary session along with his parliamentary bloc to elect a new president because this is a national and not individual interest. Unfortunately, "things are not in the hands of the Lebanese."

COMMENT

¶17. (C) Siniora has not been this agitated in our presence since last summer's war. As a Sunni, he feels that he has taken significant political risks -- such as backing a Christian-led army against Sunni militants and issuing his seven points calling (essentially) for disarming militias -- that are in Lebanon's interests but that aren't appreciated by an aging, suspicious, and parochial Patriarch. As a one-time Arab nationalist who has shifted to becoming a Lebanese patriot (and who is a symbol of Lebanese independence in some international circles), Siniora must feel a particularly strong sting when he and his cabinet are criticized by the Maronite Church. But Siniora is still a bit tone-deaf when it comes to Christian concerns. We do not know why, for example, he sent a Muslim cleric to see the Patriarch, when he knows that the Patriarch is being told by Michel Aoun and others that the Sunnis want to "Islamicize" Lebanon. While having a Sunni from his inner circle as a messenger showed respect to the Patriarch, Siniora could have found a more reassuring, more secular messenger, such as Mohamad Chatah. Insensitive to his high public profile as PM, Siniora also repeats far too frequently his favorite joke about the Maronites being like salt -- a little makes a dish tasty, while too much makes it inedible.

¶18. (C) As Siniora has gone through his evolution from Arab nationalist to Lebanese patriot, the Patriarch, too, has shifted, but in a less favorable direction. Three years ago, Sfeir was the sponsor of Qornet Shehwan, an early embodiment of what later became known as the Bristol Group and then the March 14 movement. Patriarch Sfeir was an early supporter of Lebanon's independence from Syria, but now he postures as someone "neutral," "equal distance" from March 8 and March ¶14. Unfortunately, what the Patriarch thinks are neutral positions often work to the benefit of Michel Aoun and March

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8 forces, who seem constantly to whisper messages of incitement and false information against Siniora and against the Sunnis more generally. And, as we pointed out to the Patriarch, we are not sure how one can be halfway between independence and Syrian occupation, the two poles represented by March 14 and March 8. We think Sfeir's biggest problem with Siniora is probably his international profile, which Sfeir sees as more appropriately belonging to Lebanon's president. Siniora, like Rafiq Hariri before him, is charged by Aoun and others who whisper to the Patriarch as guilty of stealing the Maronite inheritance.

FELTMAN